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# 'A Convulsed and Magic Country': Tourism and Resource Histories in the Mexican Caribbean

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## ABSTRACT

Much of the discussion of 'space' in the recent literature has been concerned to provide a more 'active' account of its role in the transformation of historical epochs. Geographical frontiers, for example, are ascribed figuratively, temporally and spatially in ways that serve to influence succeeding events. Their 'discovery' is acknowledged as an element in powerful myths, which are reworked to create environmental histories as important as the material world they describe. This article takes as an example the Mexican Caribbean, which has recently been 'discovered' as a location for mass tourism and whose early tourist 'pioneers' are beginning to be celebrated in the region. It argues that far from having been an empty space, much of the area currently devoted to tourism once played an important role within global markets, especially through the production of dyewoods, chicle (the original raw material for chewing gum) and other natural resources. The paper concludes that discourses of space can be divided into three phases, the 'analogue', the 'digital' and the 'virtual', each of which contributes to a mythology of succession.

## KEYWORDS

Space, Caribbean resources, tourist histories

## INTRODUCTION

This paper traces the role of space in social relations. It takes as its point of departure the development of the Mexican Caribbean coast, a coast that has come to be known as the 'Mayan Riviera'. It examines the ways in which claims are made for 'pioneer' tourism in this region, claims which assist commercial interests in gaining control of the development discourse, and disseminating

the idea that what is happening is both sustainable and ‘natural’. In this sense the paper is an exploration of the effect of discourses, both past and present, on the process of spatial mythmaking.

Today a myth has developed around Cancun that probably explains why so much of its history is unwritten. One of the foremost tourist guides to the area says:

Cancun, until very recently, was an unknown area. Formerly it was a fishing town but over a period of thirty years it evolved into a place that has become famous worldwide. It is located in the south-east of Mexico with no more ‘body’ to it than the living spirit of the Mayas, a race that mysteriously disappeared and who were one of the great pre-Columbian cultures in Mexico. The only thing that remained was the land transformed into a paradise on earth.<sup>1</sup>

This extract reveals all the major myths about the area: Cancun was uninhabited when it was ‘discovered’; it embodied the spirit of the ancient Maya (who had mysteriously disappeared); and the few remaining mortals who survived had the good fortune to be in possession of ‘paradise’. These three myths guide much of the ‘Maya World’ tourist discourse today. That is: space was devoid of culture, Indians were devoid of ancestors, and paradise was waiting to be ‘discovered’. However, if we examine these claims closely it is possible to distinguish ways in which the metaphorical grounding of tourist expansion borrows from earlier travel writing, such as the use of pioneer ‘succession’ as an organic process, the preference for the natural sublime over human landscapes, and the utilisation of ‘virgin’ resources.<sup>2</sup>

Recent research in geography, and in history, has benefited from a more reflective view of space, and an active search for its properties and significance over time<sup>3</sup>. Space is no longer a ‘given’ in intellectual history, the blank parchment on which human purposes are written. Some writers even argue that space should be seen as enactment or performance – constructions of the human imagination, as well as materiality. In the view of Nicholas Bromley, for example, ‘space [is present] in both property’s discursive and material enactments. Space like property, is active, not static. [And] spaces of violence must be recognised as social achievements, rather than as social facts’.<sup>4</sup> Space thus assumes a role previously denied it, and performs a transitive role in the making of historical events.

This ‘active’, transitive conceptualisation of space carries implications for the way in which we view resource peripheries, particularly within the context of ‘globalisation’, a process that is increasingly seen as pre-dating modernity, rather than an outcome of it.<sup>5</sup> Geographical frontiers are ascribed, figuratively, temporally and spatially, in ways that serve to influence succeeding events. Their ‘discovery’ and ‘invention’ are acknowledged as part of powerful myths, which are worked and re-worked by human agents, serving to create environmental histories as important as the material worlds that they describe.

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Later in this paper it is suggested that the re-working of space in cultural terms consists of separate but linked processes: the analogue, digital and virtual descriptions of space. Each of these provides a different construction of space and in the Mexican Caribbean is associated with distinctive 'pioneer' generations of settlers. In charting the resource histories of places, and the histories of the visitors and tourists who have 'discovered' them, we are engaged in continually re-working a narrative. The social processes through which we come to identify space over time resemble a series of 'successions'.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of existential spaces, as part of the fabric of environmental history, is seen clearly in the accounts of the Caribbean coast of Mexico, today's state of Quintana Roo. Over time we view a 'wilderness', discovered by archaeologists, an abandoned space utilised by capitalist hoteliers and, today, a 'tropical paradise' promising escape to international tourists.

### TROPICAL PARADISES, ABANDONED PLACES

The coastal resort of Playa Del Carmen, today one of the most rapidly growing urban centres in Latin America, was 'discovered' in the summer of 1966, according to one account in a tourist magazine:

Playa was discovered by a sixteen year old boy, in the summer of 1966, a momentous event, which changed forever the face of history for this small fishing village... In 1966 Fernando Barbachano Herrero, born of a family of pioneers, arrived there and found it inhabited by about eighty people, with a single pier made of local (*chico zapote*) wood. Fernando befriended the local landowner, Roman Xian Lopez, and spent the next two years trying to talk him into relinquishing some of his land...<sup>7</sup>

Two years later, in 1968, Fernando Barbachano bought twenty-seven hectares of this land adjacent to the beach for just over \$13,000 (US), or six cents a square meter. In 2003 it was worth about \$400 (US) a square metre, an increase of over six thousand per cent.

Today this piece of real estate constitutes less than ten per cent of Playa's prime tourist development. As Playa developed, piers were built for the increasing number of tourist craft, and game fishers, hotels and bars were constructed fronting the 'virgin' beach, and clubs were opened a short way from the shoreline. The first hotel to be constructed was Hotel Molcas, in the 1970s, next to the little ferry terminal to Cozumel (Figure 1). Gradually, more people were attracted to the tourist potential of Playa, and the list of celebrated 'pioneers' grew longer.<sup>8</sup> Today the town possesses shopping malls selling designer clothes and global brands. International gourmet restaurants compete for the lucrative tourist business: twenty million tourists visited Mexico in 2002. Today, the beaches draw migrants from all over Mexico, particularly the poorer states such as Chiapas, and the town's hinterland contains squatter settlements as large as any in urban

Latin America. These areas have names which sometimes suggest wider political struggles: like 'Donaldo Colosio', a 'squatter' area named after a prominent politician in the PRI (Party of the Institutional Revolution) who was murdered in 1994 in Tijuana by a crime syndicate.

Tourist 'pioneers' had taken an interest in the Mexican Caribbean coast even before Fernando Barbachano stumbled upon the resort potential of Playa Del Carmen.

In the longer view tourist expansion on the coast of Quintana Roo can be compared with the trade in dyewood three hundred years ago, or of mahogany and chicle, the raw material for chewing gum, during the last century. All three were milestones in the development of the region, and linked it with global markets and consumers.<sup>9</sup> Each possessed their own 'pioneers', like Fernando Barbachano, who 'discovered' a land of rich natural resources, apparently unworked by human hand. To some extent, however, these timber and gum pioneers not only paved the way for tourism; they re-entered the story at a later date as pioneers of tourism themselves. It is worth recalling that the account of Playa's 'discovery' in the passage above refers to a 'single pier made of local *zapote* wood...'. Chicozapote was the tree from which chicle (chewing gum resin) was tapped. The chicle industry occupied what had become an 'abandoned space'.

The island of Cozumel was one of the first pioneer tourist zones on the coast. The Grand Hotel Louvre on Cozumel, owned by Refugio Granados, had been constructed in the 1920s. Advertised in the *Revista de Quintana Roo*, in 1929, the owners publicised its merits in the following terms:

Tourists, tourist, tourists, travellers and travel agents! If you want a well-ventilated room and are demanding of the very best in attention, come to the Gran Hotel Louvre. In addition it has a magnificent restaurant attached. Set meals and a la carte meals are available in a constantly changing menu. Expert chef. Calle Juarez with Zaragoza. Proprietor Refugio Granados.<sup>10</sup>

Between the late 1920s and 1940s two other hotels, the Yuri and Playa, were built on Cozumel, but at this time most visitors to what are today major Mayan archaeological sites on the mainland still slept in improvised cabins. The majority of tourists still left Cozumel by boat, landed on the mainland coast at Tankah, stayed briefly at the most important copra estate nearby, and then either cut a path in the jungle to Tulum, or took a boat along the coast.

In this they were beating a track that had been followed by earlier pioneers, the most famous of whom were John Stephens and Frederick Catherwood, the 'giants' of Mayan archaeology in the mid nineteenth century. Stephens and Catherwood had already explored the major Mayan sites of northern Yucatan, such as Chichen Itza and Uxmal, and arrived in Valladolid at the end of March 1841. They made enquiries about getting to the Caribbean coast, no mean feat at the time since there were no roads. 'It is almost impossible to conceive what

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difficulty we had in learning anything definite concerning the road we ought to take', Stephens reported to his diary.

The coastal location that they aimed for was the settlement of Tankah, where a pirate named Molas had sought to evade the authorities in Merida, where he had been convicted of smuggling. Since there was no road they had to journey to the northern (Gulf) coast and take a 'canoa' down the Caribbean, past today's Cancun and Isla Mujeres, to the Mayan fortress of Tulum. The journey took them two weeks, and was accomplished despite every privation known to explorers of the time: no wind, no protection against the sun, so much provisioning that there was no space for the human occupants, and little idea of where they were headed. Stephens says their objective was 'in following the track of the Spaniards along this coast, to discover vestiges or remains of the great (Mayan) buildings of lime and stone (that had been reported)...'.

They sailed first past Isla Mujeres, or 'Mugeres' as Stephens described it, an island notorious as the resort of Lafitte, another pirate who (rather like Molas) was well regarded by the Mayan fishing communities of the coast, and 'paid them well for all he took from them...'. Next was Cancun, or Kancune, as Stephens described it, which left a very poor impression on the travellers. It was nothing but 'a barren strip of land, with sand hills, where the water was so salt we could barely drink it...'. Whenever they landed, usually in search of water, they were pursued by hordes of 'moschetoes', that made life difficult, and would continue to have done so one hundred and thirty years later, if the Mexican Government had not intervened and sprayed them into oblivion.

They went on to land on Cozumel, at the only inhabited spot, the ranch of San Miguel, where they record that 'our act of taking possession was unusually exciting'. Here they stopped to feast on turtle and fresh water, strolled along the shoreline picking up shells, and went to sleep in their hammocks, 'as piratical a group as ever scuttled a ship at sea'.

The island of Cozumel had been 'discovered' several times before; once 'by accident' it is said, when Juan de Grijalva caught sight of it in March 1518. He had set sail from Cuba.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Grijalva, three centuries earlier, John Stephens knew where he was in 1841 and noted for the benefit of the *Modern Traveller* that they alone had proprietorship of 'this desolate island'.

It was another century before modern tourism arrived in Cozumel, with the construction of Hotel Playa and the patronage of an influential American, William Chamberlain. From about 1952 onwards Chamberlain enticed numerous foreigners to the area, and constructed the first tourist *cabanas*, which he named 'Hotel Mayalum'. This was also the first recorded attempt to link the region and its coastal tourist attractions to the cultural life of the Maya, the historical antecedents of the 'Maya World', the brand name for most of this zone today.

In the mythology of pioneer coastal tourism, the main protagonists in Cozumel were adventurous Americans and a medley of rather unusual Mexican businessmen. On 13 February 1948 a Panamanian merchant vessel, the *Narwhal*,

under Captain J. Wilson Berringer, with a crew of ten, transporting bananas from Guatemala to Mobile, Alabama, was cast onto the reefs off the island. The owner of the boat, Charlie Fair, travelled from New York to Cozumel to take charge of the rescue and supervise the paperwork. Here he soon made contact with Carlos Namur, one of the few local people to speak English. Namur, who is now celebrated in the museum of Cozumel as a 'founder and tourist pioneer', booked the American into the Hotel Playa, and Charlie Fair was so entranced with the island, and his stay there, that he almost forgot the circumstances of his arrival, and wrote to his friends recommending they join him.

By 1957 an article on the island had appeared in the American glossy magazine, *Holiday*, and the first eight tourists arrived on a new flight from Merida to Cozumel.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately their 'host', the indefatigable Carlos Namur, was himself in the United States at the time, and the tourists had to be put up with local families, some of them on the second floor of the building occupied by the harbourmaster. Sharing this accommodation only excited their interest more, and since several of the tourists were journalists, they soon made good copy of their visit to tropical Mexico. Soon afterwards, in the 1960s, the French filmmaker Jacques Cousteau discovered the reefs nearby, and added some media celebrity to the island.

In Mexico Cozumel had blazed a minor trail as a tourist destination, followed by Islas Mujeres, where relatively small hotels and guest-houses began to cluster around the modest central square, and provided important facilities for discriminating groups of Mexicans and Americans anxious to avoid large-scale tourism. By 1975 ninety thousand tourists were visiting Islas Mujeres annually. Behind much of this growth were powerful new political interests, later to play a part in the development of Cancun, and linked to the person of President Luis Echevarria, whose godfather was a leading businessman on the island.

During the 1960s fourteen new hotels were built in Cozumel, with a total of four hundred beds: an apparently small figure in the light of subsequent developments. But by the end of the decade, fifty-seven thousand tourists had visited the island: two-thirds of them foreigners. This remarkable success prompted some of the inhabitants to examine their own histories more carefully. It was soon revealed that almost the entire population was made up of 'pioneers', or 'founders' (*forjadores*). Contrary to the prevailing view, 'created by global tourism, that the Mexican Caribbean lacked any identity of its own', refugees from the Caste War had in fact repopulated the island shortly after Stephens and Catherwood's visit. Unlike the rebel Maya who held the mainland, the twenty-two families of refugees who arrived in Cozumel in 1848 felt themselves to be the only surviving 'Mexicans' on the peninsula.<sup>13</sup>

Cozumel had played an important advance role in tourist development because, apart from its roster of former chicle entrepreneurs, who were interested in putting their capital into a profitable new business, it also boasted an international airport, originally built during the Second World War for United States

air reconnaissance. Cozumel had traditionally been a staging post for the natural resources of the region; now it was a natural watering hole for foreign tourists, moving in the opposite direction. Unlike Cancun, however, the pioneers and founders of Cozumel had been its own indigenous bourgeoisie.<sup>14</sup>

The development of Cancun, beginning in the 1970s, made earlier tourist incursions seem very modest indeed. In the view of some observers Cancun was chosen because the Mexican Caribbean was like a political tinderbox, liable to explode at any time.<sup>15</sup> Cancun was not simply a gigantic tourist playground, in this view, it was an 'abandoned space' on the frontier, which needed to be 'settled, employed and occupied'. Even in 1970 almost half of the population of Cancun was from outside Quintana Roo; as the zone developed it pulled in people from all over southeast Mexico.

Before work even started on the vast physical infrastructure of Cancun, the Mexican Fund for Tourist Infrastructure (Infratur) and the Banco de Mexico completed an unusually complete feasibility study of the tourist potential of the region. The study reported that the withdrawal of Cuba from the tourist scene had left a vacuum that Mexico was in a weak position to exploit, since so much of its Caribbean coast was undeveloped. The danger was that other places, such as the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Jamaica and the Virgin Islands, would fill the vacuum. The study suggested that two sites should be given priority for Mexican investment: Cancun, in the Caribbean and Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo on the Pacific. The early development of Cozumel gave the development of Cancun an advantage, and the reasons why the Yucatan peninsula should be favoured were spelled out in the document. It possessed an army of under-employed or irregularly employed workers, since the demise of henequen and chicle, and these workers lived close to some of the most beautiful marine environments in the Caribbean. Rapid tourist development would bring them both together.

Cancun could only be developed if all the available land was acquired by the project. The task of land acquisition, much of it in the form of lakes and marine lagoons, proved to be a mammoth operation. Unfortunately the man who was its guiding light, Carlos Nadir, died before his work could be completed.<sup>16</sup> The project was divided into five sub-projects, separating the tourist zone from the new city. A bridge was built connecting the island of Cancun with the mainland, and the harbour of Puerto Juarez. At the same time an international airport was constructed which could handle incoming flights from Europe and North America, as well as Mexico.

The second part of the project involved a massive drive to 'sanitise' the zone, eradicating mosquitoes like those that had bothered Stephens and Catherwood, as well as most other forms of wildlife, and providing a secure supply of fresh water by constructing twenty enormous holes in the porous rocks. Yucatan has no rivers. This was followed by the electrification of the new zone, linking it with the grid in Yucatan, and opening up a vast new telecommunications network.



Finally, the whole area was subjected to building and construction on a scale hitherto unknown in the Caribbean.

About two-thirds of the capital for the development of Cancun, initially 142 million dollars, was provided by the Mexican state, with help from Inter-American Development Bank loans. The scale of this investment, and the risks borne by the Mexican Government, virtually assured complementary private investment of a similar magnitude. Cancun began to function as a tourist resort in 1974 with fewer than two hundred hotel beds. By 1980, when the project's first phase was completed, there were 47 hotels, four thousand beds and almost three hundred thousand tourists staying in Cancun. The coast was passing from a forest enclave, linking tropical forest products with the consumption of hardwoods and chewing gum in the United States, to a tourist emporium, bringing people from far away to utilise their consumer power on the Mexican Caribbean coast.

The collapse of oil prices in 1981 forced a massive devaluation of the Mexican currency the following year and, as a consequence, more efforts were made throughout the 1980s and 1990s to earn additional foreign exchange from tourism. Environmental concerns, although frequently voiced, did little to hold back the pace of tourism on the Caribbean coast, nor the gradual destruction of the coastal habitat. Pollution became a growing problem, and Cancun spawned slums, which spread northwards, and sewage, which turned the lagoon on which the city was constructed into a diseased sewer, alive with algal blooms, and exuding a terrible stench. Ecological problems were mirrored by a growth in criminal activity, including the large-scale laundering of drug money through inflated resort development. Drug barons moved into Cancun in the late 1980s, and one of them, Rafael Aguilar Guajardo, was famously gunned down in Cancun in April 1993.

By the early 1990s Cancun had lost much of its initial appeal, even to tourists. It had developed too quickly, and at too much cost, and the developers feared that however much lip service was paid to the environment, it was evident that mass tourism, especially from the United States and Europe (which was increasingly the market for Cancun's resort owners), was moving elsewhere. As Cancun lost its glitter, so the tourists began moving south, in a quest for the unspoiled beach, and the living reef. Cancun had been the principal example of what has been described as an 'archipelago of artificial paradises' in tropical Mexico (Loreto and Cabo San Lucas in Baja California, Ixtapa near Acapulco, Puerto Escondido on the coast of Oaxaca) but Cancun had always been the jewel in the Mexican tourist crown<sup>17</sup>.

Gradually foreign tourists began to follow the Mexican tourists, the backpackers and beachcombers, south of Cancun to the coastal area opposite Cozumel, where local 'tourist pioneers' established themselves in the 1970s, in places like Akumal. Most of the tourists however did not travel so far south, and they arrived eventually at Playa del Carmen, as we have seen. Here the 'pioneers'

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were of more recent provenance, like Ted Rhodes quoted in a tourist magazine. They were also instilled with 'Green' ambitions:

Ted Rhodes is a local developer and pioneer for ecologically sound technologies, who is attempting to combine state-of-the-art technology, while enjoying the benefits of eco-tourism. He's only been in the Playa area since 1995, but is in the process of planning and developing six major projects ... carrying disdain for the use of the word 'eco', which he feels has been an over-abused term for a less than fully understood concept. Ted describes his ventures as 'raw jungle converted with the hand of Mother Nature, to create a positive impact, using Mother Nature's rules'. He works with the natural elements of the land, employing natural building materials from agriculture to culture, including water treatment which respects the composition and inhabitants of the land...

Comments like those of Ted Rhodes have received attention because they encapsulate the difficulty with which advocates of more sustainable tourism have to grapple. It is clear that much of the development of Mexico's Caribbean coast has been at the expense of conservation objectives – whether marine turtles, mangroves or coral reefs. The natural environment is fragile and needs protection. Nevertheless the economy of the region is highly dependent on tourism, and any suggestion that the environment is under threat rebounds against tourism. The response has been to provide a new 'eco-tourist' discourse that appears to pay attention to the concerns of the environmentalist and the tourist. Coastal development has been 're-branded' as 'eco-friendly', 'natural' and sustainable. However, these new ways of repackaging development pay scant attention to the history of the area, which shows every sign of social and political conflict and little consideration for long-term sustainable development. Like earlier forays into public relations on behalf of the Mexican nation, this 'presentation of self' was largely for external (tourist) consumption<sup>18</sup>.

## SOUTHERN FRONTIERS

The journey south from Tulum, beyond the 'Mayan Riviera' reveals a darker, stranger history, and one which promises to colour the future development of tourism on the coast. The Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve is, in legal terms, one of the most comprehensively protected environments in Mexico. So successfully 'protected' has it become, in fact, that most local people are only barely aware of its existence as a 'reserve' at all. It extends over 530,000 hectares, a huge area of almost uninhabited lagoon, reef, mangroves, lakes, tropical forest and savannah. As the guidebooks record:

... a feature of Sian Ka'an is that conservation has generally been given precedence over tourism. There are few roads, none of them paved: the one from Tulum to Punta Allen, a very little-used road from Felipe Carrillo Puerto to Vigia Chico on

the coast, and one from Mahahual to the south ... it is very difficult to find your way around'.<sup>19</sup>

There are several reasons why it is difficult to orientate yourself in southern Quintana Roo, south of Tulum and the 'Mayan Riviera'. First, there are fewer brand names to guide and interest the tourist and, partly because of that, there are fewer tourists. The road to Vigia Chico is a case in point. Even armed with a good guidebook the tourist would be hard pressed to say exactly what Vigia Chico represents today. It takes about three hours to get there through the forest and mangroves, on a very rough road, and is not recommended in a hired car. When you 'arrive', there is a small Mexican military base, manned by tired conscript soldiers and, one vestige of the past, a lighthouse. There is nothing much to see, but with luck a boatman will take you to Punta Allen, a veritable 'watering hole', which does possess hotels, and guides to the Reserve.

Vigia Chico, however, possesses a secret. The rocky path that is the 'road' through the forest was once the route of a railway line, and the carriages which passed along this line, originally pulled by mules, contained quantities of chicle, which was transferred to boats and sold to Wrigley's in Cozumel.<sup>20</sup> The railway track, like most of the area, was controlled not by the Mexican state, in the 1920s, but by General May, the principal chief or *cacique*, among the Maya who had defected and formed their own state, under the aegis of the 'Talking Cross'. Gradually their power was shifting away from them. As Nelson Reed wrote: 'the dynamite used to blast the road-head was a death knell to the still unreconstructed Maya (and) the railroad spikes were nails in their coffins...'. When you eventually arrived at Vigia Chico in the 1920s the 'quality of life there was suggested by the presence of glass floors in several of the buildings, floors made by pushing rum bottles upside down into the sand'.<sup>21</sup>

When the Mayan General first landed here he had just met with the Mexican President Carranza in Mexico City, and had been feted as a natural ally of the Revolutionary government. He had also acquired a new lady friend there, and one of the difficulties he experienced in getting ashore at Vigia Chico was persuading her that she was safe in the hands of the Mayan warriors who assembled on the shore. Later, in 1926 the Governor of Yucatan Siurob had gone to negotiate with May and his army, to try and get them to make concessions, if not surrender.

Those who refused to surrender, the hard-core 'Cruzoob' followers, took what remained of their 'Talking Cross' and carried it to their villages, deep in the jungle. Their grandchildren still patrol these villages today, to the north of their old capital, No Cah Balam Na Santa Cruz.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, they too have just entered the tourist guides. One tourist guide to the state of Quintana Roo now recommends a drive to one of these Cruzoob villages, Tixcacal Guardia, as part of its 'scar of the Caste War' tour, one of several recommended 'routes of the past'.<sup>23</sup> This tour also takes you to Tihuosuco, where the Caste War began in 1847, and the local museum serves as a vibrant source of local memory, and

initiates new activities bringing the children together with their past: exhibitions, plays, music, oral history and encouragement for artisan skills of all kinds. In other villages tourists are unwelcome unless they have come to pay respect to the 'Talking Cross'. It is some years since visitors, like the distinguished historian Nelson Reed, were asked for money to buy arms.<sup>24</sup>

A plan is afoot to build a new *chiclero* 'village' at Chachoben, so that tourists to the southern coast can spend some time admiring the region's history. Chachoben is also a 'real' village; it was once a settlement founded by *chicleros* for their extended tapping seasons in the forest. It now promises, with considerable help from the state government, to be a theme park, perhaps like the others to the north, which were once pristine lagoon. Locations like Xell-Ha, Xcaret, and Tres Rios, were accessible to anyone even in the 1980s, and now charge \$39 (US)-a-person entry.

The location of Chachoben is important because it signals the development of one of the most ambitious tourist frontiers in Latin America. A six-lane highway is being built, linking the existing road south to the largely undeveloped coast, to Mahahual and on to Xkalak, almost one hundred miles. Here a new generation of tourist pioneers is establishing itself, around diving and game fishing. These 'pioneers' threaten to leave when the tourist 'armies' descend, as they fear they will. The electric grid has not arrived, although the pylons were being erected when I drove past in April 2003. Meanwhile, fishing communities like Xkalak, which was destroyed once by Hurricane Janet in 1955, are being gradually rebuilt, in preparation for the arrival of 'civilisation', bars, clubs and 'night-life'.

## RESOURCE HISTORIES AND THE NATURE OF SPACE

It has been suggested, by the Swiss philosopher Aurel Schmidt, that 'existential space' in the western world has been occupied by three distinct epochs – the 'analogue', the 'digital' and the 'virtual'.<sup>25</sup> Schmidt was thinking of broad historical epochs, but the metaphors work quite well for exploring specific resource and tourist histories and the utilisation of space. The 'tourist pioneers' described above fit conveniently into the first category: analogue space means the discovery of 'place' and its initial advertisement to others, usually a limited coterie of *cognoscenti*. Digital space, on the other hand, is associated with the consolidation of resource use, with the commercialisation of 'place' and its economic development. Digital space is exemplified by the way in which peripheries are transformed, and increasingly integrated within global models of production and consumption. The histories of these spaces are inscribed in the minds of people as necessary and inevitable, as *chicle* production was seen as inevitable and almost 'timeless' during most of the twentieth century. Finally, virtual space describes the creation or 'recreation' of place regardless of 'where' it is located: Disneyworld, and Center Parcs, in many geographical locations

in Europe and North America, and perhaps, also Xell-Ha or Chachoben, as described above.

We might, however, choose to push the metaphor a lot further, and examine the lack of spatial and temporal continuities in the 'real world', which these 'ideal types' fail to capture.<sup>26</sup> If we look closely we find that places are discovered and rediscovered, over time, and by different groups of people. Successive generations of 'pioneers' and their resource histories are not located in 'black boxes' in time or space that can be 'taken out' and understood. They are, in fact, full of ambiguities. First, there is the ambiguity of 'abandoned spaces', spaces that open the door as it were to new 'discovery', settlement and occupation. These discoveries erase some histories, just as they illuminate others.

Second, it is clear that the 'other' in these discoveries is an invention of the human imagination, rather than a form of geopolitical mapping. Tourist histories are about what people aspire to *be*, as much as who they are. This problem of identity is a central concern when resource histories are being transformed, and host communities feel threatened. An example is the alleged response of the fishing community of Xkalak to outside entrepreneurs, who were interested in recruiting them for tourist development. The fishing communities wanted to be left alone to fish.

Finally, where – and at what distance – are these discourses of space, and their histories *created*? As we peel back the layers of the onion we invariably find somebody has already been 'there' before the histories we are examining. In the case of the Mexican Caribbean the paradoxes offered by a 'convulsed and magic country' suggest an engagement with nature complicated by myth and location, and probably only comprehensible in the long view.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Everest Tourist Guide to Cancun and the Riviera Maya* 2002. Cancun.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, G. Jones, 'Imaginative Geographies of Latin America', in P. Swanson (ed.), *The Companion to Latin American Studies* (London: Edward Arnold, 2003), pp. 5–25; L. Martins, 'A Naturalist's Vision of the Tropics: Charles Darwin and the Brazilian Landscape', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 21, I (2000), 19–33; and R. D. Salvatore, 'North American Travel Narratives and the Ordering/Othering of South America (c.1810–1860)', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 9, 1, (1996), 85–110.

<sup>3</sup> H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by D. Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Blackwells, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Blomley, 'Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence: the Frontier, the Survey, and the Grid', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 93 (2003): 121–41.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Hayter, Trevor Barnes and Michael Bradshaw, 'Relocating Resource Peripheries to the Core of Economic Geography's Theorizing: Rationales and Agenda', *Area*, 35 (2003): 15–23.

## 'A CONVULSED AND MAGIC COUNTRY'

<sup>6</sup> See William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in the glossy *Playa!* Magazine, published in Playa Del Carmen, August 1999.

<sup>8</sup> The search for a history of its own has recently intensified in Playa. The newspaper *Por Esto!* carried a report on 16 November 2003 that a commemorative plaque, carrying the names of 'the founding families' of Playa had been unveiled in the centre. The report noted that most of the one hundred thousand people living in Playa today had no idea that the town had such a long history. It had been a fishing village only 'a few decades ago'. However, Playa had been mentioned on November 14, 1902, when a local chicle contractor had sought permission for a road to the coast, and it was agreed that this was now the date on which it was 'founded'.

<sup>9</sup> Alfredo Cesar Dachary and Stella Maris Arnaiz Burne, *El Caribe Mexicano: una frontera olvidada* (University of Quintana Roo, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> This was in 1929, quoted by Dachary and Arnaiz (p. 394) from a collection celebrating local government on the island.

<sup>11</sup> The coast of today's Quintana Roo had never been fully 'abandoned' by the Spanish, although the distance from Merida made it extremely difficult to govern. Before the Conquest this coast had been among the most densely settled areas of the Maya world. Its population was decimated by war, European epidemics, and the movement of population towards the interior. Eventually, at the time of the Caste War the whole zone was converted into a refuge for Maya fleeing the colonial bondage. It was then left to English timber traders and buccaneers, as well as small indigenous settlements. Anthony Andrews and Grant Jones, 'Asentamientos coloniales en la costa de Quintana Roo', *Temas Antropológicos*, 23.1 (2001).

<sup>12</sup> In 1960 the Cuban revolution, led by Fidel Castro, had effectively closed the door to foreign tourism to Cuba from the United States. At the same time international tourist markets were expanding dramatically, in Europe and Japan, as well as North America, and foreign vacations were becoming a part of the fabric of middle class recreation. This provided opportunities for locations with only a fragmentary 'tourist history' to develop them. The choice of Mexico as a location for American tourists had its origins in a cultural and political relationship which informed the continent for the rest of the twentieth century. American relations with its southern neighbour had deep roots. The Revolution of 1910, and the subsequent social upheavals, mystified most Americans. Nevertheless, the prime interpreter of Mexico's history to Americans, and the main advocate of its attraction as a destination, was a journalist, Anita Brenner, who, unlike her friends Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti, was little known outside Mexico. She became a highly regarded travel writer.

As Susannah Glusker has put it, 'Mexico, viewed from the perspective of the voyager, was a condensed utopia' in the 1920s, for anyone fleeing from racial intolerance in Europe, or atrophy in the United States 'it was full of opportunities for adventure and the paradoxes offered by a convulsed and "magic" country'. Susannah Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own* (Austin: University of Texas Press 1998), xiii.

<sup>13</sup> The Caste War was a struggle between the Mayan Indian population of Yucatan and their white oppressors, which began in 1847 and continued for much of the next half century. The people who sought refuge in Cozumel supported the regional elite, unlike

the Maya who found refuge in British Honduras (Belize) to the south. Cozumel received its full recognition, as the bearer of the Mexican flag, when it was visited by President Cardenas on 29 November 1939. For the distinguished history of Cozumel see Velio Vivas Valdes, *Forjadores: personalidades sobresalientes en la conformacion de la identidad cozumelena* (Cozumel: Ayuntamiento de Cozumel, 2001); Michel Antochiw and Alfredo Cesar Dachary, *Historia de Cozumel* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> Antochiw and Dachary, *Historia de Cozumel*. There is little written on Cancun that reflects its economic importance and cultural diversity. Priscilla Connolly's chapter 'Urban planning and segmented land markets in Cancun', in G. Jones and P. M. Ward, *Methodology for Land and Housing Market Analysis* (London: UCL Press, 1994) is a useful discussion of how the city was formed and the gap between the utopia of the planner's dream for tourism and the loss of land from *ejido* (peasant) communities.

<sup>15</sup> Dachary and Arnaiz, *El Caribe Mexicano*. It should be noted that other plans for 'integrated development' during the 1970s in Mexico (and elsewhere in Latin America) were often a response to social unrest, peasant agitation and popular opposition, which the governing PRI sought to neutralise. The scale of Cancun's subsequent development might obscure similarities with other well-funded, if misplaced, programs of integrated development elsewhere, often under the aegis of the Mexican Federal Government's PIDER (Program of Integral and Regional Development).

<sup>16</sup> Dachary and Arnaiz, *El Caribe Mexicano*.

<sup>17</sup> Lane Simonian, *Defending the Land of the Jaguar: A History of Conservation in Mexico* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), p. 190.

<sup>18</sup> Mexico's 'presentation of self' to the outside world was particularly evident in the World Fairs at which it participated from 1880 until the 1930s. The Mexican participation in the Paris Exhibition of 1889 exemplified the porfirian project of modernisation, and was designed to show how much Mexico had 'advanced'. Subsequent exhibitions, like those of Rio de Janeiro in 1922 and Seville in 1929 were designed to show how much the country had benefited from a revolution. Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, *Mexico at the World Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation* (San Francisco, University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Nick Rider, *Yucatan and Mayan Mexico* (Cadogan Guides, 2002), 217.

<sup>20</sup> Chicle had been tapped by the Maya, and chewed by Mexican armies for centuries, but the development of a chicle industry for export did not begin until the first two decades of the twentieth century. The demand lay in the United States, and the commercial power lay in the hands of companies like Thomas Adams and William Wrigley's. Many of the early chicleiros came from outside Yucatan, principally the state of Veracruz. See Michael Redclift, *Chewing Gum: The Fortunes of Taste* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Nelson Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, Second Edition, 2001), p. 304.

<sup>22</sup> This town is now called Felipe Carrillo Puerto, after the assassinated socialist governor of Yucatan. He was assassinated, according to some accounts, because he was having a passionate affair with Alma Reed, the American sister of John Reed, a good friend of Anita Brenner's. R.A. Sosa Ferreyro, *El Crimen Del Miedo* (Mexico DF: Costa Amic, 1969).

<sup>23</sup> *The State of Quintana Roo* (Mexico DF: Ediciones Nueva Guia 2001).

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<sup>24</sup> The Cruzoob sent a message to an academic conference held in Merida in 1997, on the history of the Caste War. The message ended 'The Maya are a living people, and our traditional authorities are a present institution, not of the past as some would wish to see them. As you know we have ideas and a voice that must be heard, and if this does not happen we are always ready for more centuries of resistance, educating our sons in our traditions, preparing always for a rebirth of our ancient grandeur. They still make war on us'. Quoted in the Post-Postscript to Nelson Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatan* (Stanford University Press, Second Edition, 2001), p. 361.

<sup>25</sup> Aurel Schmidt. *Von Raum zu Raum. Versuch über das Reisen* (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1998). Quoted in Johannes Maerk and Erika Muller, 'Running still: reflexiones epistemológicas acerca de espacio, viaje y turismo', in J. Maerk and Ian Boxill (eds), *Tourism in the Caribbean* (Universidad de Quintana Roo, Chetumal, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> The growth of mass tourism on the Mexican Caribbean has led to the 'discovery' of activities with strong tourist appeal. Many of these are entirely genuine, but they have been 'enhanced' by the press and media, for their tourist value. A good example of the rediscovery of heritage on the Caribbean coast has been the preparation of anthologies of music from Quintana Roo, which, it is claimed, had been 'forgotten'. A recent collection of recordings dates back to 1943. See 'Preparan antología de la Música Quinanaense', *Por Esto!*, Cancun, 9 April 2003).